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Nobody (?) Likes A Spoiler

August 1, 2008 in Uncategorized by [The China Beat](#) | [3 comments](#)

By Miri Kim

On July 31st, SBS, a major South Korean broadcast network, [aired a short clip](#) showing details of the carefully guarded rehearsals for the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics (the video clip has now been removed from all major news and video sites). As the news (and the clip) spread on the web, Chinese and Korean news, portal sites, and users on blogs and message boards expressed, to put it mildly, consternation. On popular Chinese portals like sina.com and 163.com, polls show that a large percentage of the respondents support revoking the offending station's broadcasting privileges, or investigating who bore responsibility for the leak and levying a heavy fine on the station (presumably, the other two major South Korean networks covering the Olympics this summer, MBC and KBS, would be unaffected by such sanctions).

Korean reactions on blogs and comments that I have seen range from dismay, embarrassment, and strong (and often vicious, as par the course in online discourses) condemnation of SBS, to defensiveness and indifference (basically, 不关心), and even to excitement at the promise of the beauty of the opening ceremony captured by the footage. In what is one of the most tech-savvy societies in the world, South Korea's wired citizens, or "netizens," can be found at the cutting edge of any controversy, and the SBS incident is no exception. Furthermore, Korean users are just as, if not more mindful of developments on Chinese-language sites than internet users in predominantly English-speaking countries like the U.S., and true to form, are following this issue very closely on both international and home fronts, though for how intensely and for how long remains unclear at this point in time.

The majority opinion of Koreans regarding the SBS broadcast might be expressed with the following phrase: "쪽팔린다"—roughly equivalent to "losing face." But with this incident as with others like it, the reactions of Korean netizens have already covered a seemingly infinite array of opinions. Comments from Korean users run the gamut from SBS-bashing, finger-pointing at Chinese security measures, anti-China rhetoric and nationalistic calls for the return of unrelated landmasses to [sighs of disappointment](#). And no matter how clear-cut a point being debated may appear on screen, an observer is sure to notice a contrarian, off-the-wall, or downright inflammatory voice in a comment thread; if you have braved internet fora of any linguistic and national type, this won't sound like anything new. The level of connectivity and breadth of involvement of Koreans in online discourse, however, still outpaces that of a number of other countries.

The Korean media's coverage of the leak has so far tended to reflect one subset of sentiments expressed by individual netizens in various discussions—regret, and concern over the possible loss of respect from other nations at this perceived breach of media etiquette—not only in relation to China, but to everyone who will be participating and tuning in to the Beijing Olympics. (For examples, in Korean, see these reports at [Star News](#), [Sports Seoul](#), [Dalian](#), and [dongA](#).)

China's economic growth in recent years has brought both opportunities and worries domestically and internationally. Many countries around the globe share a similar sort of anticipation where China is concerned, but particularly in South Korea, there is a widespread feeling that the Beijing Olympics may decisively raise China's international profile, perhaps to the effect of marginalizing its East Asian neighbors. There are precedents for the first notion—the Tokyo and Sapporo Olympics in 1964 and 1972 and the Seoul Olympics in 1988 also served to showcase the economic and political development of Japan and Korea on an international stage.

For now, feelings are running high, but internet firestorms have proven to be unpredictable in the past, and international relations between China and South Korea will probably be able to weather this incident, barring further negativity. Will things cool off before August 8? Will governmental investigation and censure bring resolution? Will another controversy soon take the place of the SBS debacle in the wilds of the net? Hard to say. Some netizens may be scoffing at rumors that South Korean athletes will be shut out of the Olympics (not likely) or booed or given the silent treatment at the opening ceremony by irate Chinese spectators (somewhat more likely). Other, scattered voices

are asking for restraint and civility, and that spirit of goodwill may prevail. But certainly, if the mood of many Chinese and Korean internet users are any indication, SBS's leak is a faux pas on a grand scale indeed.

Miri Kim is a graduate student in Chinese history at the University of California, Irvine.

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